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ABSTRACT

Results from two studies are offered in this examination of differing perceptions of influential factors on gifted children's development. The first study surveyed parents, teachers, and gifted children in two southwestern states regarding their perception of the factors that have contributed to "giftedness." A 6-point Likert scale was constructed and administered to 28 parents, 9 teachers, and 59 students. Students had an I.Q. of 130 or above. Early stimulation, being read to at an early age, the influence of mother, nutrition, and reading were seen as important by teachers and parents, but not by the children. Students felt that "God" was the most influential factor, with effort and motivation being a very close second and third. Teachers were seen as more important by children than by parents or teachers. In the second study (a survey of 31 educators of gifted students in Oxford, England), attitudes and behavioral concerns were addressed. British professionals felt that the following five variables were most important: early stimulation, motivation, preschool education, mother, and student's own interests. Interventions such as tutors and mentors were not seen as being highly influential in either of the studies. Implications for assessment, evaluation, and teaching are outlined, and areas of needed research are noted. (Contains 22 references.) (JDD)

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# Gifted Children's, Teachers', and Parents' Perceptions of Influential Factors on Gifted Development

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Running Head: GIFTED DEVELOPMENT

Abstract

Over the past twenty years, much research has been conducted and emphasis placed on gifted children, their education and development. This article examines differing perceptions of influential factors on gifted children's development. In one study, parents, teachers and gifted children were surveyed regarding their perception of the factors that have contributed to "giftedness." In a second study, attitudes, as well as behavioral concerns, are addressed. A third study surveys a cross-cultural sample of British educational professionals. The results of these studies are explored and implications for instruction and assessment are offered.

# Gifted Children's, Teachers', and Parents' Perceptions of Influential Factors on Gifted Development

The development of gifted children has been examined from many differing perspectives over the past twenty years. The role of internal variables has been explored as well as external and environmental factors. The cognitive development and structures of the gifted have been examined (Shaughnessy, 1991) as well as relevant, salient variables operative in the development of the gifted. At the same time, certain external factors have also been seen to be operative such as mentoring (Shaughnessy, 1989).

Sternberg (1986) has examined a number of relevant variables operative in the success or failure of gifted individuals. Shaughnessy and Neely (1992, in press) have explored the personality elements that may be critical for academic and life success. Odom and Shaughnessy (1989) have explored personality factors relevant to giftedness in the mathematical domain and Ham and Shaughnessy (1992) have discerned especially critical factors in scientific thinking skill development. Shaughnessy, Jausovec and Lehtonen (1992) have written on the conception of giftedness in various cultures and nations.

There is some research regarding attribution and giftedness. Laffoon (1989) has examined the attributions of gifted, underachieving gifted and non-gifted students and found

differences in these three groups. Kammer (1986) examined differences in attribution of academic success and failure for 116 gifted students and did find that effort was attributed to success rather than luck, chance, fate and other external factors.

Oren (1983) however, found that feedback and classroom evaluative structures do tend to influence students' attributional tendencies. Torrance (1986) has argued that the mentor is an external variable that significantly influences academic and life achievement. A mentor may also affect one's attributions either directly or indirectly. Shaughnessy and Siegel (1992) have investigated the educational problems faced by both gifted boys and specifically girls in nontraditional fields.

In order to discern the perspectives of teachers, parents and students regarding their perceptions of relevant factors regarding giftedness, the follow study was conducted.

Two gifted programs in two separate southwestern states were asked to participate in a survey. Students placed all had an I.Q. of 130 or above based on an individually admnistered I.Q. test given by a school psychologist. A six point scale was constructed and administered to 28 parents, 9 teachers, and 59 gifted students.

Subjects

There were eight female and one male teachers and all teachers indicated "white" as the racial/ethnic group. There were 29 female gifted students, 28 male gifted students and 2 who forgot to code their gender on the response sheets. In terms of ethnicity, there were 43 white students, 13 who chose "Hispanic/Mexican", 1 Afro-American student and 2 did not respond. Of the parents who responded to the survey, there were 17 female and 12 male parents.

In addition, there was space for students and parents to contribute their ideas. Interestingly, some students did not like being referred to as "gifted" - but they did feel that "they were better than others." Many students credited their parents' occupations as salient factors. Parents felt that the home environment for learning was superior and that reading literature and the "great books" contributed to their child's giftedness. One agrarian parent indicated that she felt that handling farm animals at an early age contributed to her child's giftedness.

Results

The means and standard deviations of the 6 point Likert Scale can be found in Table 1.

Insert Table 1 here

Interestingly, there is consensus on some factors and a lack of agreement in other areas. Parents and teachers seem to agree on certain factors which are not seen as salient by the students themselves. There was a high agreement that "mother" was an influential factor. Early stimulation was seen as important by teachers and parents, but not by the children. Teachers were seen to be more important by the children but not by the parents or teachers themselves. Nutrition also was seen as important by parents and teachers, but not by the students. Reading followed a similar pattern. Luck was not seen to be a factor by any of the three groups. Neither the tutors nor the mentors were seen to be influential. T.V. was almost the lowest factor thought to be important by the teachers (luck being the lowest), while children thought it was somewhat important. Motivation and effort was highly rated by the students themselves, but neither parents nor teachers thought it as important, relatively speaking. The highest factors thought to be influential by teachers were early stimulation, being read to at an early age, and the influence of mother. The students felt that "God" was the most influential factor, with effort and motivation being a very close second and third. The parents' indicators were that early stimulation was primary, followed by being read to, the child's own interests, the influence of mother and, last, by motivation.

In rank order, the first five factors by our sample for each group are as follows:

| Teachers | Students | Parents |
|---|---|---|
| Stimulation | God | Stimulation |
| *Being Read To | Effort | Being Read To |
| *Nutrition | Motivation | Own Interests |
| Genetics | Own Interests | Mother |
| Mother | Mother | Motivation |

*Tied at 4.889

It is worthy to note that students rank effort and motivation as important factors whereas teachers do not even rank either of these in their top five. Parents rank motivation as fifth in their assessment.

Since the sample size of these three groups were unequal, ANOVA procedures were not implemented. However, T-Tests were conducted at the .05 level to discern significant differences between students and parents. Parents felt early stimulation was more important than the students did. In addition, parents also felt good nutrition to be of importance in the development of their child's giftedness.

On the other hand, students saw sports as being more of an important factor than parents did. There is an amazing degree of congruence across the 25 variables with only 3 being different. Due to the small number of teachers being sampled (N=9) it is not possible to discern differences or even form opinions and more research is necessary.

Although teachers may hold certain attitudes toward what contributes to "giftedness," these attitudes may not necessarily affect their behavior towards these students in the classroom situation, nor in terms of their teaching. Siegel (1992), using both naturalistic observation and teacher rating scales, has examined the attitude/behavior relationship with gifted children. She found that although teachers may express certain feelings toward mainstreaming and gifted children in general, when they encounter that child in the classroom, their behavior towards that child may be affected by the amount of success the teacher has with the child, and by the child's behavior in the classroom. Just as a gifted child may be accepted by certain teachers, so too may other gifted children be rejected by certain teachers.

Some teachers are able to deal effectively with gifted mainstreamed children, yet others do not have the skills and abilities to modify their teaching and the classroom curriculum and environment to deal with the child. Regardless of what the teacher attributes the child's giftedness to, if they have not been trained to work with gifted children and the personalities and behaviors these children manifest, such teachers may have difficulty helping these children learn and grow in the classroom. Some teachers are so overwhelmed with meeting the needs of their normal-achieving students that they cannot accommodate the special needs of the gifted child who may happen to have an I.Q. of 140!

Gifted children may be rejected by teachers who do not have the pedagogical skills to challenge these children and make the necessary modifications in the curriculum. Thus, teachers need to be able to consult with other professionals in a collaborative fashion and perhaps take additional course work to deal with mainstreamed, gifted children.

A second experiment was conducted in Oxford, England with 31 professional personnel involved in gifted education. The 6 point Likert Scale was distributed at a major conference for the "highly able" student. The means and standard deviates of the 6 point Likert Scale can be found in Table 2.

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Insert Table 2 here

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Interestingly enough, there is some consensus and disagreement between American parents and teachers and British personnel. In the British sample, there were 4 males, 23 females and 4 individuals who did not respond to the question of gender. The British professionals gave the following five variables as being of importance:

| | British Sample |
|---|---|
| Early Stimulation | 5.1 |
| Motivation | 4.8 |
| Pre-School/Nursery | 4.48 |
| Mother | 4.419 |
| Own Interests | 4.3 |

Apparently, early stimulation is thought to be critical on both sides of the Atlantic, and mother or "mum" (in the British vernacular) is also seen to be of importance. "Own Interests" also made the top five in Britain, so there is agreement with American students and parents.

Although we know a good deal about teacher attitudes, we must remember to examine and evaluate teachers' behavior, and, in addition, to examine the behavior of gifted children to discern how their behavior may be affecting their teachers - either positively or negatively. This may affect whether the teacher is accepting and tries to help the child or if the teacher is rejecting or indifferent to the child, and simply assigns "busy work" to keep the child occupied.

In some classes, gifted kids are used as "teacher aides" to help the less competent students. Other teachers are able to find useful, challenging work for gifted students in the regular classroom environment.

Much more research must be conducted examining the relationship of teachers' behavior towards gifted children in addition to teachers' attitudes toward gifted children. Also, the preparation of said teachers may play an important role in their attitudes and behavior toward them.

Lastly, teachers' past histories of success and failure with gifted children should be examined. If problems have been present

in the past, this may subtly influence teachers' attitudes and behaviors toward these students.

Implications for Assessment, Evaluation, and Teaching

For the past 50 years, assessment in general has involved a static approach. An individually administered I.Q. test was given, a child placed, and little was done in terms of follow-up, or an attempt made to assist those children who did not make the magic 130 cutoff. Recently, Gardner (1983), and Sternberg (1985) have reconceptualized intelligence as have others (for a review, see Shaughnessy, 1984). Gardner's "frames of mind" and Sternberg's triarchic theory have led the way to a new formulation of intelligence, and others such as Vygotsky (1962, 1978) have advocated more malleable approaches to intelligence and intelligence enhancement. Sternberg (1986) has tried to indicate that we can, in fact, make people smarter and others have explored the role of personality factors in achievement in specific areas. Shaughnessy and Stanley (1992) have advocated adopting Vygotsky's idea of the "zone of proximal development" to aid in the enhancement of gifted students. In a recent presentation, Lehtonen, Jausovec, Stanley, and Shaughnessy (1991) have offered a number of suggestions and domains of assistance to aid the gifted and "nearly gifted" to reach their optimal potential.

Stanley (1992, in press) has reviewed the testing concerns relative to enhancement in the zone of proximal development and

has suggested that we more aggressively assist children in the development of their skills and abilities. He favors utilizing a more dynamic assessment procedure (DAP) for evaluation and assessment.

From the results of this preliminary survey, it may seem that effort and motivation are seen as important by the students, but that parents and teachers feel that other more early interventions and stimulations, and long-term investments by the mother may be more crucial and critical in the development of the gifted child. Neither tutors nor mentors were seen to be influential. Perhaps some students have not as yet had, or encountered, a true mentor. They may not have needed a tutor or the parents may not have provided one for outside enrichment. Present interventions such as tutors and mentors were not seen as being highly influential. The implications of these perceptions may have some effect on teaching and gifted education.

Some interesting questions may have resulted from this preliminary study. What is the result of the lack of consensus regarding factors in the development of giftedness? Do parents and teachers focus on different elements in the nurturing of students seen to be gifted? Once clearly identified, what specific things do parents and teachers do differently? When identified, what things do gifted children do differently?

## Summary and Conclusions

This paper has attempted to address several issues regarding the development of gifted children. There are different postures as to the factors which contribute to giftedness. There are also ramifications and repercussions regarding the growth of gifted children depending upon which stance one adopts. While there are certainly environmental influences as well as genetic influences, we do not at present take all of these factors into account as readily as we should or as much as we are able. Attributions, attitudes and behaviors toward gifted children in the real world are relevant issues to explore with the gifted. As we approach the year 2000, perhaps parents, teachers and others will more critically examine the many variables which contribute to giftedness and attempt to enhance those that can be improved.

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Table 1

Means and Standard Deviations for 25 Separate Assessment Domains

| | Teachers N-9 | | Students N-59 | | Parents N-28 | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Mean | S.D. | Mean | S.D. | Mean | S.D. |
| 1) Genetics | 4.77 | 1.2 | 4.08 | 1.54 | 4.44 | 1.28 |
| 2) Early Stimulation | 5.0 | .8 | 4.27 | 1.63 | 5.31 | 1.16 |
| 3) Pre/Nursery School | 3.3 | 1.3 | 2.94 | 1.76 | 3.13 | 1.66 |
| 4) Older Siblings | 3.2 | 1.98 | 3.05 | 1.82 | 2.55 | 1.90 |
| 5) Influence of Mother | 4.66 | 1.3 | 4.76 | 1.46 | 4.893 | 1.28 |
| 6) Influence of Father | 4.2 | 1.71 | 4.22 | 1.62 | 4.48 | 1.40 |
| 7) Teachers | 3.55 | 1.87 | 4.45 | 1.36 | 4.06 | 1.28 |
| 8) Good Nutrition | 4.88 | .78 | 3.48 | 1.57 | 4.37 | 1.20 |
| 9) Read to at early age | 4.88 | 1.26 | 4.35 | 1.54 | 4.96 | 1.40 |
| 10) Luck, chance, or Fate | 2.0 | 1.65 | 2.40 | 1.66 | 2.37 | 1.76 |
| 11) Tutors | 2.44 | .88 | 1.71 | .96 | 2.20 | 1.56 |
| 12) Mentors | 2.88 | 1.53 | 3.19 | 1.67 | 3.03 | 1.59 |
| 13) Hobbies | 3.22 | 1.64 | 4.01 | 1.61 | 4.00 | 1.41 |
| 14) Sports | 2.55 | 1.50 | 3.78 | 1.65 | 3.00 | 1.58 |
| 15) Television | 1.66 | 1.00 | 3.00 | 1.61 | 2.75 | 1.24 |
| 16) Peers | 2.44 | 1.01 | 3.51 | 1.43 | 3.48 | 1.30 |
| 18) Relatives | 3.55 | 1.13 | 3.57 | 1.42 | 3.75 | 1.38 |
| 19) Own Interests | 3.66 | 1.50 | 4.98 | 1.02 | 4.897 | 1.27 |
| 21) Effort | 4.22 | 1.85 | 5.13 | 1.00 | 4.72 | 1.41 |
| 22) Study Skills | 3.88 | 1.76 | 4.55 | 1.31 | 4.55 | 1.45 |
| 23) God | 3.00 | 2.16 | 5.39 | 1.18 | 4.78 | 1.57 |
| 24) Doing well on tests | 3.22 | 1.71 | 4.60 | 1.41 | 4.17 | 1.69 |
| 25) Working harder than others | 3.22 | 1.71 | 4.42 | 1.5 | 4.31 | 1.56 |

Table 2

Means and Standard Deviations for British Professionals

| | Mean | S.D. | | Mean | S.D. | | Mean | S.D. |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1) | 4.25 | 1.4 | 10) | 4.2 | 1.6 | 19) | 4.3 | 1.3 |
| 2) | 5.19 | .8 | 11) | 3.6 | 1.2 | 20) | 4.8 | 1.5 |
| 3) | 4.48 | 1.2 | 12) | 3.9 | 1.3 | 21) | 4.0 | 1.4 |
| 4) | 2.7 | 1.3 | 13) | 3.2 | 1.1 | 22) | 3.6 | 1.2 |
| 5) | 4.4 | 1.2 | 14) | 2.3 | 1.2 | 23) | 1.9 | 1.8 |
| 6) | 4.1 | 1.8 | 15) | 2.1 | 1.1 | 24) | 2.6 | 1.4 |
| 7) | 4.3 | 1.1 | 16) | 3.2 | 1.4 | 25) | 2.3 | 1.1 |
| 8) | 3.8 | 1.1 | 17) | 3.0 | 1.2 | | | |
| 9) | 4.0 | 1.3 | 18) | 2.5 | 1.1 | | | |